

**NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE
SOUTHEAST REGION**

NEWS RELEASE

9721 Executive Center Drive, North, St. Petersburg, FL 33702

CONTACT: Chris Smith, Public Affairs Officer	SERONR00-026
(727) 570-5301, chris.smith@noaa.gov	FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
pager (888) 955-4854	June 13, 2000
Roy Crabtree, Fishery Management Specialist	
(727) 570-5305, Roy.Crabtree@noaa.gov	

**NEW REGULATIONS ANNOUNCED FOR THE GULF OF MEXICO GAG,
BLACK, AND RED GROUPER FISHERIES
Federal action creates two marine protected areas**

NOAA Fisheries has approved new measures and issued implementing regulations intended to prevent overfishing of gag, black and red grouper in the eastern Gulf of Mexico. The regulations will be implemented on June 19, 2000. The measures, proposed by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, will raise the minimum size limit for both recreational and commercial fishermen. Also, consistent with President Clinton's May 26, 2000, Executive Order on marine protected areas, the new measures establish two areas in the Gulf that will be closed to all fishing except for highly migratory species.

The new measures, which have been under development, subjected to public scrutiny and comment, and been endorsed by many professional panels over the past year include:

- (1) increasing the recreational minimum size limit for gag and black grouper to 22 inches from 20 inches;
- (2) increasing the commercial minimum size limit for gag and black grouper from 24 inches from 20 inches;

(MORE)

(2)

(3) prohibiting the sale of gag, black, and red grouper harvested from Federal waters in the eastern Gulf of Mexico from February 15 to March 15 each year;

(4) closing two important areas in the eastern Gulf, totaling 219 square nautical miles, to all fishing except for highly migratory species. These areas are known to be places where large populations of groupers aggregate to spawn.

"The increase in the minimum size limits for recreational and commercial fisheries will reduce harvest rates and allow more female gag and black grouper to reach reproductive age and spawn," said William Hogarth, administrator of NOAA Fisheries' Southeast Region. "We are confident that the differences in the recreational and commercial size limits will result in an equitable reduction in the harvest by each sector."

During the February 15 through March 15 closures, no one will be allowed to buy or sell gag, black, or red grouper and no one aboard a vessel who holds only a commercial permit for Gulf reef fish may possess any of these three species in the Gulf, regardless of where the fish were harvested. However, people who hold charter vessel or headboat permits in addition to commercial Gulf reef fish permits may continue to retain gag, black, and red grouper under the recreational bag and possession limit, provided the vessel is operating as a charter vessel or headboat. Reef fish caught under the recreational bag limit may not be sold.

"NOAA Fisheries is also implementing the Council's recommendation to close two areas to all fishing year-round to further protect spawning aggregations. This would not affect fishing for highly migratory species of tunas, sharks, and billfishes," added Hogarth. "The Council has requested that the agency also prohibit fishing for highly migratory species in these two areas. We expect to act on that request soon."

The boundaries of the two closed areas are listed below. A map that shows these areas is posted on the Gulf Council's Web site: www.gulfcouncil.org/#Grouper/

Madison and Swanson Sites

NW corner	29°17' N. lat., 85°50' W. long.
NE corner	29°17' N. lat., 85°38' W. long.
SW corner	29°06' N. lat., 85°50' W. long.
SE corner	29°06' N. lat., 85°38' W. long.

(MORE)

(3)

Steamboat Lumps

NW corner	28°14' N. lat., 84°48' W. long.
NE corner	28°14' N. lat., 84°37' W. long.
SW corner	28°03' N. lat., 84°48' W. long.
SE corner	28°03' N. lat., 84°37' W. long.

Reports of violations during weekly business hours should go to the Southeast Region Law Enforcement Division at (727) 570-5344, or after hours and weekends at its National Enforcement Hotline at (800) 853-1964.

This and other Southeast Regional news releases and fishery bulletins are available on the region's Internet home page: <http://caldera.sero.nmfs.gov> or the NOAA News home page, at <http://www.noaanews.noaa.gov>

Principal steward of the nation's living marine resources, the National Marine Fisheries Service regulates the nation's commercial and recreational fisheries and manages species under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act throughout federal waters. An agency of the Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, NMFS also protects marine and anadromous species under the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act.